



Reuters/CNS

Elian Gonzalez plays at the home of his cousin and great-uncle in Miami Jan. 4.

Custody battle continues for youth

MIAMI (CNS) — Archbishop John C. Favalora of Miami urged calm, restraint and prayers in early January as U.S. authorities sought to resolve custody of Elian Gonzalez, the Cuban boy rescued at sea Nov. 25.

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service decided Jan. 5 that 6-year-old Elian should be returned to his father in Cuba, Juan Gonzalez. But Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., sought to prevent the child's return by subpoenaing him to appear before Congress. He later said he would abide by any court decision in the case.

The Rev. Robert W. Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, praised the INS decision and criticized "delaying tactics" that prevent the boy's quick reunion with his father.

However, Jan. 10, a Miami-Dade Circuit

Court judge ordered that Elian remain in the United States until a March hearing.

In early December, shortly after the international custody battle began, the Catholic bishops of Cuba said the case should be resolved promptly in accord with the universally accepted recognition that minor children belong with their parents.

Elian's mother and stepfather died in an attempt to reach the United States when their boat sank before reaching the Florida coast. Elian was found clinging to an inner tube.

A great-uncle in Miami has been caring for him and seeking legal custody despite the father's wish to bring Elian back to Cuba.

The controversy has led to large rallies in Cuba for Elian's return and demonstrations in Miami against his return.

In announcing the INS decision Jan. 5, INS Commissioner Doris Meissner said that "Juan Gonzalez of Cuba has the sole legal authority to speak on behalf of his son, Elian, regarding Elian's immigration status in the United States."

She said the INS uncovered no grounds to question his "parental and legal rights." She also noted that "family reunification has long been a cornerstone of both American immigration law and INS practice."

In a brief statement Jan. 7, Archbishop Favalora urged Catholic parishes throughout the archdiocese to pray "for peace and harmony in our community and for divine guidance for those charged with resolving this issue."

A National Council of Churches delegation to Cuba has reported that reuniting the boy and father is the only just solution.

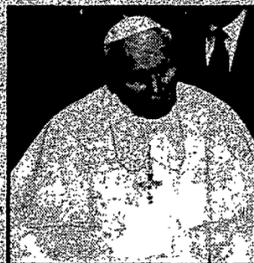


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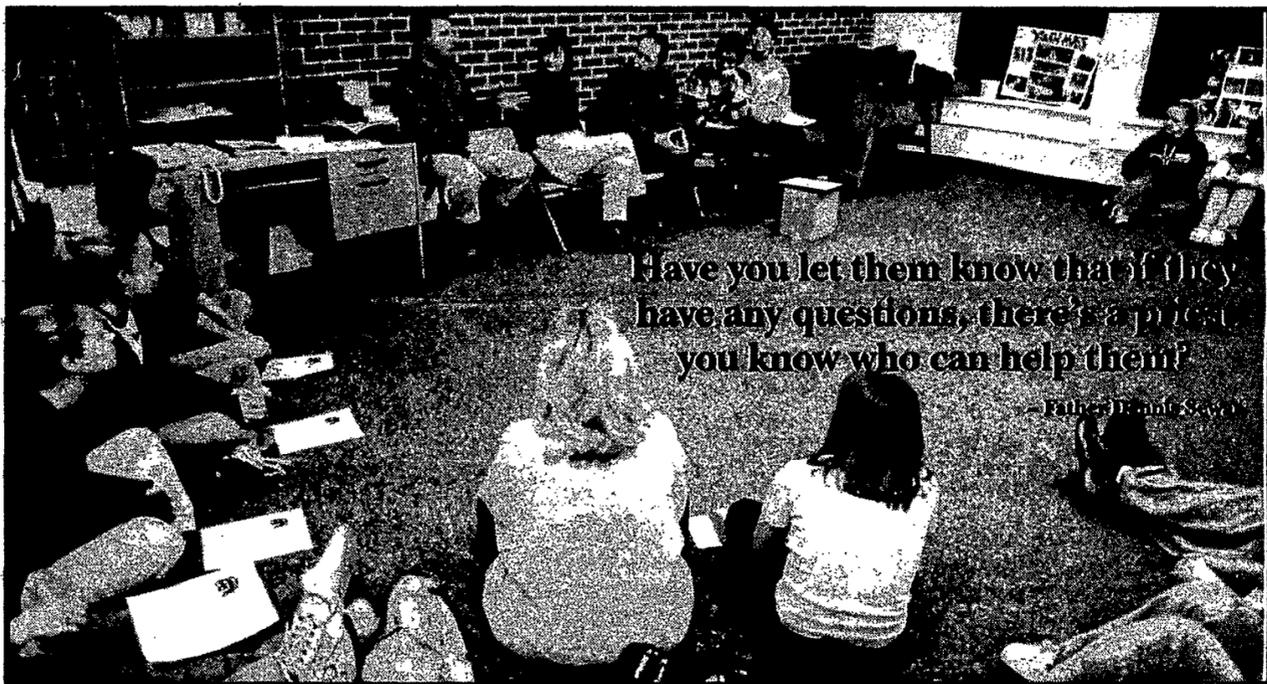
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Have you let them know that if they have any questions, there's a place you know who can help them?

— Father Dennis Sewar

Teenagers at St. Lawrence Church, Greece, listen to Father John DeSocio, assistant to the bishop for vocations, during a vocations-night Jan. 9. Seated next to Father DeSocio is Patricia Finnerty, diocesan director of vocations awareness.

A wider call to vocations

Father Eric Phillips, 30, credits a pastor from his childhood, Father Joseph Beatini, as the first influence steering his life toward a priestly vocation.

"He was such a warm, loving man. I got such a positive image of a priest," said Father Phillips, who grew up in Fairport's Church of the Assumption.

Father Phillips also recalls a conversation he had as a teen with his dad, "one of those 'What are you going to do for the rest of your life' talks."

"He asked, 'Have you thought about the priesthood?' At the time, I said, 'No way!'" Father Phillips said. "But when I thought about it later, I was glad he thought enough of me that he would ask me that question."

As a young adult, he formed a friendship with Father Charles Manning, now the pastor at Greece's Holy Name of Jesus Church.

"He definitely opened a door. He was someone who was interested in me as a person," Father Phillips said.

All these people helped pave the way for his decision to pursue a priestly vocation. Father Phillips was ordained in 1998 and now

serves as priest intern at St. Joseph's Church in Penfield.

This blend of influences — good priest role models and an invitation to vocation from both priests and lay people — fits the approach that diocesan officials would like to see implemented on a widespread basis.

As National Vocations Awareness Week is celebrated Jan. 9-15, the Rochester Diocese has begun implementing an extensive set of initiatives to promote vocations. Bishop Matthew H. Clark is expected early this year to approve the action plan — the first of its kind in the diocese. The plan is overseen by Patricia Finnerty, diocesan director of vocations awareness, and Father John DeSocio, assistant to the bishop for vocations.

Finnerty and Father DeSocio developed the plan over the last several months with the help of the newly formed Committee for Priestly Vocations. The committee includes Finnerty; Father DeSocio; Father Lee Chase, pastor, St. Thomas More Parish, Brighton; Father John Hayes, pastor, St. Joseph/St. William, Livonia/Conesus; Father Timothy Horan, pastor, St. Andrew's and St. Philip

Neri, Rochester; Father Manning; Father Tim Niven, priest intern, Tioga Catholic Community; Father Foster Rogers, pastor, St. Pius X Church, Chili; and Father Dennis Sewar, pastor, Church of the Annunciation, Rochester.

Finnerty and Father DeSocio acknowledged that the current priest shortage — and its projected worsening — fueled development of the action plan. The diocese now has about 150 active full-time diocesan priests, they noted. That number is projected to drop to 64 by the year 2025.

Finnerty, who began her newly created position in June 1999, said the action plan's first year centers almost entirely on priestly vocations. Beginning in the second year, the three-year plan will also encompass vocations to the diaconate, male and female religious orders, and lay ministries.

These efforts are crucial, Father Manning said, because the days of large immigrant Catholic families in America — many of which routinely earmarked their oldest children for vocations — are gone.

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Story by Mike Latona • Photos by Mike Mergen